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Tory naval cuts belittle Britain

Having lived in Britain for several years shortly after the Second World War, I well recall how Tories feared that Labour was going to give away not only the Empire but every vestige of British influence around the globe. Ironically, it is now a Tory Government that is doing just that through its restructuring of the defence programme.

Whether Britain could avoid this by spending more on defence is a matter of economics, but the way Mr Nott, the Defence Secretary, is shaping the proposed changes appears to be designed specifically to eliminate the remaining potential that Britain has for influencing the world scene.

These changes will limit sharply Britain's naval strategy to one of reliance on strategic nuclear weapons, in such as Polaris and Trident, at sea in submarines and very limited capability for helping defend the North Atlantic sea lanes. They will hardly dent the Army and the RAF, virtually not at all.

Clearly this is an overall strategy of defending continental Europe with ground and air forces and washing Britain's hands of any other responsibilities at sea, other than the nuclear deterrent forces. There are three reasons why this is a short-sighted view of Britain's role in the world.

First, Nato is at a juncture from which it must begin to take cognizance of threats to its interests from outside its geographical domain. This is because it is so apparent that Nato's vital interests today are not limited to its own territory, such as the high percentage of Europe's oil that flows from the Gulf.

Accordingly, the threat of a Soviet military assault on Western Europe is less today than for some time despite its numerical advantage in forces. There are simply too many other and less risky wars, in which the Soviets can challenge us.

It will not be easy to widen the focus of Nato's attention. Yet, it absolutely must be done, so much so that the United States will give it the necessary attention unilaterally, if the alliance does not awaken. This is no time to have the alliance going in two directions at once. Yet, here is Britain, by its new accent in defence policy, implicitly turning its back on the world outside Europe.

The accent in the restructured defence programme appears to be on static ground and air forces in Europe. They serve no usefulness in deterring the global threats Nato is facing today in the Gulf and may well face elsewhere in the years ahead. The Royal Navy could play a role in global deterrence disproportionate to its size.

When considering the deterrent impact of a show of naval force in some remote region, there is a multiplier effect: if that force is international rather than just United States. Moreover, the Royal Navy is particularly suited to this type of role. Because of its long history of patrolling the seas, its ships can show up almost anywhere on the globe without arousing the same sense of alarm that many other navies would serve. Under Mr Nott's plan the Royal Navy would eschew such a role as it dropped back in size to the equivalent of half a dozen of the smaller navies.

Second, this cut at the Royal Navy also hurts Nato where it is least prepared. That is in defence of the sea lanes to America. In two world wars the joint defence of those sea lanes by the Royal Navy and the United States Navy saved Western Europe from sure defeat.

Since the end of World War II we have forgotten that lesson, in large measure because initially there was no threat on the horizon. Yet, a formidable Soviet navy has evolved. Most naval analysts feel that the Soviets intend to employ their navy in defence of the homeland rather than against the North Atlantic sea lanes. Neither the Kaiser nor Hitler intended, or prepared for that either, but they turned to it instantly upon going to war.

The Soviets would do the same, I believe. Besides, the Soviet Navy is not many years away from the point when it will be strong enough to plan for and intend a repetition of the German efforts should war break out. Yet, in this budget, Britain is signalling that it does not worry about this danger.

Britain, with its historic perspective of the importance of the North Atlantic sea lanes, should be sounding the alarm at this oversight in Nato's planning. Instead it is turning its back on this contribution which its heritage makes it so appropriate to make.

Finally, one of the significant contributions disproportionate to its size that the Royal Navy has made over the years since World War II is to develop new equipments and tactics of naval warfare. The American Navy is built around aircraft carriers, that were revolutionized by the Royal Navy's steam catapults and angled decks, for instance. Today the Royal Navy has designed a different breed of aircraft carrier, the through-deck cruiser or small carrier, HMS Invincible which has just joined the fleet with such success is the first of these.

This is just the sort of ship the United States Navy is going to need when it awakens from its ill-conceived fascination with mammoth supercarriers. These small, flexible carriers, however, would likely be one of the victims of Mr Nott's budget cut.

Britain is a sea power, not a large one by United States and Soviet standards, but a significant one by capability, prestige, and tradition. Britain is not, and never will be, a land power or an air power of any significance. The entire British Army of the Rhine and its air component is but a fraction of the United States reserve of forces for rapid movement to Europe, for instance.

The proposed budget cuts, then, force Britain into a minor role, as just another contributor to a static continental power complex, and forsake the considerable role she can, and should, play in the much wider sphere of maritime power.

Admiral
Stansfield Turner,
Director of the
Central Intelligence
Agency during the
Carter Administration,
argues that Mrs
Thatcher's new
defence policy
will undermine
Britain's role
in the world.